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SUBJECT: Resurrecting the Communist Bogeyman

¶1. (SBU) Prime Minister Berisha announced on January 7 a draft bill for the establishment of an anti-communism institute that would study the crimes of communism and educate the younger generation about the evils of that system. He also announced the erection of a massive obelisk in honor of the victims of communism, as well as the opening of a museum to document the crimes of that period. The government last week also decided to release a compensation package of 20 million USD to formerly persecuted people as a compensation for the time they served in prison during the communist period. These measures follow the approval of the controversial bill on lustration. The recent anti-communist campaign is progressively taking the place of the anti-corruption theme that helped propel Mr. Berisha back into power in July of 2005. The commie bashing measures, however, are generally met with skepticism as people find it ironic that a former communist party secretary resorts again to the same weapon of anti-communism to cement his stay in power.

¶2. (SBU) This is the second time in the recent history of Albania that Mr. Berisha is making an anti-communist mantra part of his pre-election rhetoric. In 1995, nearly five years after the fall of communism in Albania, Berisha passed the first lustration bill and staged what he called the anti-genocide trials that sentenced a number of former politburo members and other high ranking communist officials to death and long prison sentences. These kangaroo trials were poorly staged, provided no real evidence against those charged, and lacked any comprehensive investigative work. The Supreme Court overturned most of these decisions and the convicts were compensated for the time served in prison. Widely perceived then as nothing more than political maneuvering, the campaign nevertheless succeeded in manipulating the politically persecuted layer of the population and provided Berisha with a tool to eliminate a number of political opponents. In addition, government propaganda, buttressed by the absence of a free press, placed the Socialist Party - as the heir of the Communist base - in a weakened position.

¶3. (SBU) According to commentators there are three reasons why the Prime Minister is resorting to anti-communism for a second time, 18 years after the fall of communism. The introduction of such an anti-communist campaign helps the Prime Minister conceal the real intent of the lustration law - the elimination of prosecutors and judges that are investigating official corruption. Anti-communist propaganda will also help Berisha fill the vacuum created by the now discredited anti-corruption theme. At a time when two members of his government are under investigation and the town is full of rumors about the affairs of his two children, anti-corruption has understandably lost much of its luster. Such an initiative will also help Berisha cement his support among the politically persecuted people that have traditionally formed a strong support base for Berisha - as well as steal some of those voters away from potential political rival President Topi, who also considers former

victims of communism among his strongest supporters.